

# Structure of the U.S. Higher Education System

## Types of U.S. Higher Education Institutions

### Community Colleges

These 2-year institutions, also known as technical or junior colleges, award associate degrees upon completion of a 2-year program of study. There are nearly 1,200 two-year institutions in the United States, serving more than 11 million students. An associate degree enables students to

- Transfer to a 4-year college or university to obtain a bachelor's degree, usually after 2 additional years of study.
- Begin a career immediately in any one of hundreds of fields that do not require a 4-year degree.

A more extensive description of community colleges begins on page 15.

### Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Four-year colleges and universities award bachelor's degrees of arts or science (BA or BS) and also may award graduate and professional degrees. Credits earned at community

colleges are accepted for transfer into almost all 4-year college and university bachelor's degree programs.

Four-year institutions provide a variety of degrees including bachelor's, master's, and doctorate, and professional degrees in fields such as law, medicine and business. See the list of most common degrees on the right.

The diagram on page 10 shows how community colleges are part of the U.S. higher education structure. The diagram also shows (1) how one degree leads to another, higher degree upon completion of study and (2) the times when international students can take advantage of Optional Practical Training (OPT), which is the opportunity to work for a specified period of time in their field of study.

## Importance of Regional Accreditation

There are more than 3,300 regionally accredited colleges and

*continued on page 13*

## Most Common Degrees Awarded at Colleges and Universities

### Undergraduate Degrees      Years

#### Awarded by Community Colleges\*

<b>AA</b>	Associate of Arts . . . . .	2
<b>AS</b>	Associate of Science . . . . .	2
<b>AAS</b>	Associate of Applied Science . . . . .	2

#### Awarded by

#### 4-Year Colleges and Universities

<b>BA</b>	Bachelor of Arts . . . . .	4
<b>BS</b>	Bachelor of Science . . . . .	4

### Graduate Degrees\*\*      Years

<b>MA</b>	Master of Arts . . . . .	1-2
<b>MS</b>	Master of Science . . . . .	1-2
<b>MBA</b>	Master of Business Admin. . . . .	1-2
<b>PhD</b>	Doctor of Philosophy . . . . .	varies

\*Most community colleges also award vocational training certificates and licenses after successful completion of a 1- or 2-year program.

\*\* awarded at 4-year colleges and universities and requiring a bachelor's degree first

# Structure of the U.S. Higher Education System

## **COMMUNITY COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM**

2 years with a minimum of 60 credits required.

Upon completion, students earn an associate degree (such as AA, AS, or AAS) and can transfer course credit toward a bachelor's degree.

## **GRADUATE, MASTER'S, OR PROFESSIONAL PROGRAM**

1–3-year program. Upon completion, students earn a master's degree (such as MA, MS, or MBA) or professional degree (such as MD, JD).

## **DOCTORAL PROGRAM**

Time varies to earn a doctoral degree (such as PhD).

continued from page 9

universities in the United States. The United States, which does not have a ministry of education to oversee its educational institutions, relies on a regional accreditation process to ensure the quality and acceptability of each individual institution.

A college must be **regionally** accredited to be recognized by ministries of education. See page 28 for more information about regional accreditation.

### The Academic Year

The academic year is usually divided into two semesters of four months each, or three quarters of three months each. A full-time student takes four or five courses each semester, or three or four courses each quarter. The first academic year of higher education (called the freshman year) and the second year (called the sophomore year) usually focus on general studies. Students completing their freshman and sophomore years at a community college obtain an associate degree.

The third academic year is called the junior year and focuses on more intensive study in the chosen major. The fourth and final academic year toward obtaining a bachelor's

degree is called the senior year. It is common to refer to students by their academic year of study: students are called freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

### Freedom of Choice

Students are allowed to choose their own courses and class schedules. While this results in great freedom, the student has more responsibility for making the right choices to meet educational goals. Advisers are always ready and willing to offer advice and provide information that will help students make the right decisions.

### Course Credits

Students receive a certain number of credits for each course successfully completed. The number is directly related to the number of hours assigned to the course by the institution. For example, successful completion of a course that meets for 1 hour, three times a week equals a total of 3 credits. The same course with an additional hour of lab work equals 4 credits.

### Course Grades

Grades received at the end of a course are used to indicate how

## INTERNET RESOURCES



"Internet Resources for International Students," on page 127, is a comprehensive list of Web sites and URLs you can visit to find information on all of the topics covered in this *Guide*. You will occasionally notice that the name of an organization is printed in blue. This means you will find a related URL in the list on page 127.

well the student performed and whether the course was successfully completed. The range of grades is from *A* to *F*, with *A* as the best possible grade. An *F* indicates failure. All grades received during a course of study are combined to determine the student's grade point average (GPA). 🌐

Source: [www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/international/Documents/studentguide/sgd-structureoftheushigheredsystem.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/international/Documents/studentguide/sgd-structureoftheushigheredsystem.pdf)